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SUBJECT: HCMC ERO OBJECTS TO WEB SITE POSTING OF CONGRESSMEN'S OP-ED

REF: A) HCMC 514; B) HCMC 528; C) HANOI 872

¶1. (SBU) PolOff was called in by HCMC External Relations Office (ERO) May 16, to discuss ConGen's request to observe voting during the May 20 National Assembly elections. However, the Deputy Head of the ERO Consular Section also used the meeting to give an oral protest regarding posting on the ConGen website of the May 4 Wall Street Journal op-ed "Memo to Hanoi" by Representatives Smith, Stupak and Wolf. HCMC's website posted the column, which is sharply critical of the GVN's human rights record, in both English and in Vietnamese. The ERO protested that the article contains a "number of distortions." The Consulate should disassociate itself from this article because it reflects poorly on the executive branch when Vietnamese read it. Moreover, the decision by ConGen to post the article does not reflect the true state of our relationship where both sides try to work with each other to resolve problems.

¶2. (SBU) We responded that the article is an accurate reflection of growing concern over the ongoing human rights crackdown in Vietnam. This concern is also reflected in the unanimous passage of House Resolution 243 on Vietnam Human Rights, the May 11 White House statement condemning the sentencing of political prisoners in Syria and Vietnam, and May 15 "Declaration by the EU Presidency on the sentencing of human rights defenders in Viet Nam." We noted that -- as the crackdown intensifies and other dissidents, such as Le Quoc Quan and Nguyen Vu Binh, remain incarcerated -- the view of Vietnam in Washington could turn increasingly negative. For example, already some of the strongest voices in favour of engagement with Vietnam in the U.S. Senate expressed to the GVN their strong concern over its worsening human rights record. Some in Washington could argue that Vietnam's recent sentencing to long prison terms of six more dissidents in the weeks following our Human Rights Dialogue as a sign that the GVN was ignoring USG concerns on the issue.

¶3. (SBU) We told the ERO officials that we would forward GVN's concerns about our posting of the op-ed piece, but we observed that the GVN should be more concerned that this, and similar articles, appeared in the Wall Street Journal and other international newspapers in the first place.

¶4. (SBU) We also took the opportunity to ask ERO why we were barred from two dissident trials in HCMC on May 10 and May 15 (reftels A and B) even though Embassy officers and other international observers had been permitted to attend the May 11 trial of two Hanoi-based dissidents (reftel C). The ERO official said that he believed that there was more obvious pressure and interest in the Hanoi trial because the principal defendant in that trial -- Nguyen Van Dai -- was an internationally-recognized dissident. This extra pressure led Hanoi to waive its normal restrictions on foreigners attending trials involving Vietnamese citizens. Our ERO counterpart closed the meeting by asking why the Consul General and PolOff went to the HCMC court to attend two dissidents' trials despite prior ERO notification that we would not be admitted. We responded that the Consul General had hoped that the GVN

authorities might reconsider the decision to deny access to these trials and that we wanted to make clear USG concern about the trials.

15. (SBU) Comment: The ERO complaint about the ConGen website is unusual, especially as the article had not attracted a large number of "hits" since its posting; about 140 hits on the link and 157 separate downloads of the PDF file containing the op-ed.
End Comment.

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